

# Australia: Despite opposition, restructure continues at University of Newcastle

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17 June 2021

Defying overwhelming hostility among university staff and students to an unprecedented assault on jobs and conditions, University of Newcastle (UoN) management, in the industrial city north of Sydney, is proceeding with a sweeping restructure.

The cuts at UoN are an acute expression of the drive by the ruling class, exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, to restructure operations and working conditions in order to maximise profits, at the expense of workers and students.

Across the university's three colleges—Engineering, Science and Environment; Health, Medicine and Wellbeing; and Human and Social Futures—management aims to eliminate 164 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs among academic staff and another 61.4 FTE jobs among professional staff. Of these positions, nearly half are already vacant or will become so by the end of the year, through an “early retirement scheme” or the ending of fixed-term contracts.

A “spill and fill” process, like that imposed at Macquarie University, the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney over the past year, will force academics and staff to compete for “new” positions, supposedly amounting to 100 FTE academic staff jobs and 50.3 FTE professional staff jobs.

UoN management's change proposal states that it will achieve “financial sustainability” by “primarily tilting the staffing profile towards junior positions.” In other words, by hiring/rehiring staff on lower wages.

Staff members who do not accept the new roles, or cannot be trained for “redeployment,” will be forced into redundancy. Dozens or even hundreds of employees face being thrown onto the scrapheap, while students will end up with lower quality courses, larger class sizes and fewer opportunities for research and

collaboration with academics.

To add insult to injury, management has pledged to offer a miserly \$500 in financial advice and assistance, “through a licensed Financial Planner” for those being laid-off.

The cuts are a continuation of the restructure that began last year, which has already seen the consolidation of five faculties into three colleges, cutting or amalgamating approximately 530 of the university's 2,200 courses.

In the College of Human and Social Futures, the proposal is to consolidate five schools into four, with the merger of the schools of Humanities and Social Science and Creative Industries, and the loss of 46.7 FTE positions.

Another 74.8 FTE positions are set to be axed in the College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing, with the School of Health Science already reeling from the removal or amalgamation of 32 courses last year, and the scrapping of the disciplines of Family Studies and the Master of Workplace Health and Safety.

The College of Engineering, Science and Environment stands to lose more than 20 FTE positions, with the “Earth Science” discipline having already gone through major restructuring last year.

As at the 39 other public universities across Australia, it is unclear from these figures how many casual and fixed-term workers are being laid-off. According to Universities Australia, approximately 17,300 FTE jobs were lost in 2020, but the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) last year admitted that the real figure was closer to 90,000.

University management insists that the cuts are “necessary” to reduce costs by about \$20 million annually, because of the “introduction of caps on government funding for domestic students in December

2017” and the “impact of COVID-19 on international student revenue and reduced income from student accommodation.”

Employers and governments are seizing on the coronavirus pandemic to accelerate a decades-long pro-business offensive, against university workers and students, since the last Labor government’s pro-market “education revolution.” The changes are part of the current Liberal-National Coalition government’s demand that universities produce “job-ready” graduates, while they receive about 10 percent less funding.

None of this could happen without the complicity of the NTEU and other trade unions, which have kept university staff split into individual workplaces and straitjacketed them within the enterprising bargaining system that has facilitated years of cuts and casualisation.

UoN management says its “organisational change process” is being carried out in accordance with the NTEU’s 2018 enterprise bargaining agreement, which typically only requires “consultation” with the union and staff members, before the cuts are imposed.

The NTEU has effectively pressured staff members into taking voluntary redundancy packages, through the early retirement scheme, under the guise of exercising a “choice” to quit their jobs.

More than 4,500 staff and students have signed a petition circulated by the NTEU Newcastle branch, which was submitted last week. While the petition has been promoted as opposing the restructure, it is effectively an appeal to the vice chancellor for greater “consultation” with the union on ways to achieve management’s requirements without provoking a revolt.

The petition pleads for a “pause” on the restructure, to give “greater consideration to managing the financial situation through gradual staffing changes through natural attrition (retirements) and strategic recruitment.” That is, the NTEU accepts the entire framework of intensifying cuts to government funding, and wants to help management destroy existing jobs and replace staff with lower-paid employees.

Likewise, the University of Newcastle Students’ Association (UNSA) is essentially acting as a public relations agency for management. It has held a series of five joint meetings with senior management executives

to sell the cuts to students.

UNSA vice president of welfare and wellbeing, Jess Philbrook, told a May 26 meeting, that “we [UNSA] are not here to endorse or support, we are here to create a forum for students to have their voices heard.”

In plain English, UNSA does not oppose the cuts, but is collaborating with the university to divert growing student opposition into supposed “discussion” sessions with university executives.

Management is also stepping up its subordination of research to the demands of the corporate elite and the government, including for a military buildup. The change proposal declares that the restructures “reflect a greater focus on impactful research and enhancing engagement with industry partners.”

In 2018, the university signed an “Altitude Accord” with Lockheed Martin, one of the world’s biggest weapons manufacturers. According to a *Defence Connect* report in late 2020, the program includes a virtual lecture series presented by Lockheed Martin engineers, working on projects like the Future Submarine Program and a simulated training system for air force pilots.

Vice-Chancellor Alex Zelinsky, who was installed in November 2018, was Australia’s Chief Defence Scientist from 2012 to 2018. He is deepening the integration of the university sector into the arms industry and the US-led war preparations being directed against China and Russia.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club is the only political organisation on campus opposing the restructure and fighting to mobilise students and staff against it. To get involved with this campaign, please contact us.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**